

Thomas Stephen Hart (1871-1960)

By J. H. WILLIS

Introduction

"There was no need for an encyclopaedia in any house where Tom lived." Such was the tribute recently paid by the sisters-in-law of the late Mr. T. S. Hart, who died at Croydon on June 26, in his 90th year. His erudition and extraordinary powers of memory—in the classics as well as in science—were, indeed, almost legendary. With his passing, Victoria has lost probably the last of the "old-time", all-round, highly talented naturalists whose like we shall never see again, and, except for Mr. H. Best (now almost 97), Hart must have been the only surviving correspondent of Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller.

His father, John Hart, was a secretary and accountant who arrived in Melbourne from London during 1862. Most of his work was with building societies; but he became first secretary of the Caulfield Shire, where Thomas Stephen was born in March 30, 1871—one of ten children, half being daughters. Hart senior traced his ancestry back to one James Stephen of "Ardenbraught" (presumably in Scotland), who was born in 1670, and so proud was he of this family connection that each of his five sons received the second name "Stephen".

Young Tom attended the East St. Kilda Grammar School under the Rev. John Reid, and later Craig's Toorak College in its last year as a boys' school. He matriculated (with honours in English) at the end of 1886, embarked at once upon an Arts course at Melbourne University where he gained first-class honours in Classics and second in Mathematics during 1887, also the Wyselaskie Scholarship in Mathematics, and then graduated as B.A. in 1890 when only nineteen. Subsequently he received the degrees of Master of Arts (1892) and Bachelor of Civil Engineering (1901).

His was an alert, inquiring mind, with an astonishingly wide range of interests—Biblical Greek and antiquities, philology, surveying and cartography, road and railway routes, locomotive design, the history of early

settlement in Victoria, geography, geology, botany, shore-life and a modicum of entomology. Life was an inexhaustible adventure and the whole world around him pregnant with opportunities of probing, observing, testing and recording what he found—like Charles Darwin last century, and Gilbert White the one before, he neglected few of the alluring avenues that opened up.

When Hart decided to enter the teaching profession as a scientist, Baron von Mueller wrote a very eulogistic testimonial (April 1894) in which he was described as "an accomplished naturalist who, after extensive University studies, has acquired also practical field experience in our Colony, and who has evinced an ardent interest in original and progressive researches". He began work with the Education Department in 1896, taking geology and botany classes at the Ballarat School of Mines and tramping over much of central-western Victoria. There he remained for 17 years until his appointment as first principal of the new School of Forestry at Creswick in 1913.

The school actually dates from 1910, but, for the first three years students did not "live in" and were taught by visiting lecturers who came chiefly from the Ballarat School of Mines, Mr. Hart being among them. Between 1901 and 1908 Hart had been appointed Professor of Geology and Mineralogy at Ballarat, and this title stuck to him after he came to reside in Creswick; in fact, the townsfolk sensed a distinct prestige in having an authentic professor in their midst. Even Mueller, if prematurely, addressed his friend as "Professor" Hart when writing to him for the last time, on August 16, 1896; but the title gradually lapsed and of latter years its recipient was known to all as plain "Mister".

Several amusing stories emerged from Principal Hart's three years at Creswick. One of the rules at the School of Forestry was that all students must be indoors by a certain hour every night. The school stands aloof on a high hill above the township,

whither there would always be a general exodus on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Shortly before the dead-line time, our trusting head would appear in front of his eyrie, waving a lantern as a signal for students to abandon extra-mural activities and return to their dormitory!

One year (1916-17) was spent at Footscray Technical School, after which Hart became a teacher at the Bairnsdale School of Mines and Industries (1917-30). There he did some of his best exploratory botanical work, scouring the Lakes region for specimens and acting on the Committee of Management for Sperm Whale Head National Park from its establishment in May 1927. He left Gippsland early in 1931 to teach geography for the Correspondence School, living first at Hampton, then Brighton, and retired as a public servant at the statutory age of 65 in 1938. During the first three years of retirement he lived at Highett, and in 1939 moved for the remainder of his long life to a cottage in Dotsel Road, Croydon. He came to know the creek-flats and "foothills" country between Lilydale and Dandenong like the palm of his hand, very few plant species escaping his keen eyes in that arc of Silurian rocks and derivative soils. Apart from one short visit to southern Tasmania and a shorter one to Adelaide, he never travelled outside his home state.

Hart was elected an Associate Member of the Royal Society of Victoria in 1894 (when living in Brighton), and a Country Member upon appointment to Ballarat in 1896. Between 1894 and 1917 he contributed ten geological papers that were published in the Society's *Proceedings*.

Long Association with the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria

It is not known just how early Hart became attracted to nature study; but all the male side of his family seems to have had a leaning that way. In August 1886 the three brothers, Thomas, George and Godfrey (perhaps with a few others), founded a small private body that they called the "Natural History Society and Saturday Club". This enabled them to read papers on matters of mutual interest and to share experiences gained in their week-end excursions around the

heathlands of Caulfield and Brighton, the beaches and forests farther afield. Two thin exercise books give handwritten accounts of these meetings, the 15th (and presumably last) of which was held in March 1887 when Tom was just 16 years of age. He and George contributed most of the papers; there is one each by Godfrey and M. S. Hart, but none by elder brother John who may have been too busy with his university course. Tom's paper on September 26, 1886, was on the "*Genus Eucalyptus*", and this subject was destined to remain a favourite, life-long study. He gradually acquired an amazing knowledge of the past range of certain eucalypt species, particularly around Melbourne, through studying the maps and field notes of our earliest surveyors.

John S. Hart, born December 27, 1866, and also a Master of Arts (as well as a B.Sc.), set botanical papers for university examinations, examined in botany at the Pharmacy College, Melbourne, did a brilliant theological course and later became Anglican Bishop of Wanganatta, from 1927 until retirement in 1942—he died at 85 on May 28, 1952. John and Thomas joined the Field Naturalists Club on the same evening, in August 1887, the former being a joint secretary for the year 1890-91. John led botanical excursions to Cheltenham in November 1890 and September 1891, and was very active in the club's early affairs; but the younger brother Thomas's début in the pages of the *Victorian Naturalist*—either by exhibit, note or article—was not until September 1892, when his geological paper on "The Kerrie Conglomerates" was published [*Vict. Nat.* 9: 64-66].

Why did T. S. Hart wait just five years before appearing in print, when he must have had a spate of observations to put on record? Perhaps he was preoccupied with an exacting university course or, what is more likely, his innate modesty and diffidence proved too much for him before such natural history "giants" as Baron von Mueller, Sir Baldwin Spencer, Sir Frederick McCoy, Hon. C. A. Topp, D. M'Alpine, T. S. Hall, H. T. Tisdall, A. J. Campbell, C. French, etc., whose presence at F.N.C.V. meetings may have awed him. Latterly he tended more and more toward phytologic re-



The late T. S. Hart, during the opening of Memorial Gates at the entrance to the Victorian School of Forestry, Creswick, on October 10, 1952.

Photo by courtesy Ballarat Courier

These all serve to show his interest in the distribution of our vegetation.

It was a proud day for Mr. Hart when honorary membership was conferred upon him on August 8, 1937, after 50 years as a worthy and productive member of the F.N.C.V.—this honour should have come to him ten years previously. He led numerous excursions during the past quarter of a century, chiefly to localities in or near the Greater Melbourne area, and these forays were of a highly instructive nature to the participants. Not only did he carefully prepare his itinerary, fortified with sketches drawn from parish plans, but he would *always* write a report on the main features observed, whether it were published in the *Victorian Naturalist* or not.

He was a familiar figure at all wild-flower shows, until the last five years of declining strength, cheerfully giving help in the identification of unnamed specimens for exhibit and often taking charge of a special section devoted to "pygmy plants" (minute species of *Crassula*, *Drosera*, *Centrolepis*, ephemeral *Stylidiaceae* and *Compositae*), which were one of his pet interests. Plant parasitism was another line of inquiry that afforded him special enjoyment, and he wrote several informative articles on our species of mistletoes and dodder-laurels. In days when the Club used to hold its monthly meetings at the old Royal Society's hall, Hart was a frequent attendee. Being hard of hearing for several decades, he preferred to remain downstairs, examining the exhibits and chatting to a few cronies of kindred tastes, while the lecture went on upstairs; but sometimes the enthusiastic "chatter" would reach such a crescendo that someone had to go below and mildly admonish the offenders!

At the revival of the Plant Names Subcommittee, in May 1943, Mr. Hart's presence was highly desirable, and he consented to act although it meant monthly journeys from Croydon to Melbourne Herbarium. Deafness prevented him from hearing much that

searches and his last paper, more than 61 years after the first, was on "Labillardière's Plant Names" [*Vict. Nat.* 70: 173-75 (Jan. 1954)]. Considering his vast knowledge, Hart wrote relatively little for publication in the interim, five of the more important botanical articles being:

"Notes on the Distribution of Eucalypts about Creswick and Clunes" [*Vict. Nat.* 34: 83-92, 99-107 (Oct.-Nov. 1917)].

"Botanical Notes about Bairnsdale and the Eastern Lakes" [*Vict. Nat.* 40: 107-116, with map (Oct. 1923)].

"The Victorian Mistletoes" [*Vict. Nat.* 55: 44-51, with key (July 1938)]—see also "Mistletoe Fruits and Birds" in *Vict. Nat.* 57: 175-77 (Feb. 1941)].

"The Yellow Box, and a Lost Vegetation" [*Vict. Nat.* 56: 9-13 (May 1939)].

"Notes on the Identification and Growth of Certain Dodder-laurels" [*Vict. Nat.* 63: 12-16 (May 1946)].

was being discussed and, to while away the times during which his opinion on this or that was not consulted, he would settle down with a volume of Mueller's *Fragmenta Phytographiae Australiae* (all in Latin) and chuckle intermittently as some phrase tickled his fancy.

The classical mind of T.S.H. turned often to the etymology of plant names, to the reasons why their authors chose a particular Greek word. Works of the botanist J. J. H. de Labillardière held great fascination for him, and staff members of Melbourne Herbarium often coaxed him to talk about that early French voyager—if only to hear the delightful way in which “La-billardière” would invariably roll off his tongue. Some ignoramus wrote a few paragraphs on “*Chorisema*” for Oriël's column in the *Argus* of October 24, 1938; it was claimed that the word was of aboriginal origin, meaning “rejoice and dance, because there is water here”. Immediately two correspondents hastened to explain (*Argus*, October 26) that the word was derived from Greek—*choros* “a dance”, and *zema* “a drink”—because Labillardière's thirsty party danced with joy when they discovered a spring of water, while exploring the coast of Western Australia near Esperance. Neither explanation was anywhere near the truth, but the second absurd legend still persists in some writings on Western Australian flowers. Mr. Hart pointed out that the true roots of *Chorizema* were *chorizo* “I separate” and *nema* “a filament” (in allusion to the free stamens), Labillardière having purposely shortened the spelling “*Chorizonema*” for the sake of euphony—as he did with *Campynema*, *Calytris* and other generic names.

Conclusion

Now this savant has gone to a well-earned repose, covered with honour, respected and beloved by all who knew him. In 1898 he had married Ethel Jane, daughter of the Congregational clergyman Rev. James Rickard, then stationed at Brighton. There were no children of the union, but they adopted three nephews and a niece who had been orphaned; Mrs. Hart died some ten years ago.

T. S. Hart was a short stocky man

who changed little in 40 years, his white hair, beard and merry twinkling blue eyes giving him a peculiarly venerable, “Santa Clausian” appearance. To many of us he seemed almost other-worldly, with his thoughts far in the clouds; but he was well aware of mundane happenings too, and a good sense of humour was apparent in his conversation (one could never call it “small talk”) as he spoke in a high-pitched rather husky voice, punctuated with little sniggers.

By nature he was sensitive, self-effacing and most cautious, a simple-hearted happy soul who warmed and attracted people; one never heard him speak critically or disparagingly of others. All his work bore the hallmark of meticulous forethought and thoroughness. His help was therefore sought by a wide circle of correspondents, and, in acknowledging their letters, he would often make one or even several drafts before phrasing a reply that satisfied him. If there were the slightest doubt in his mind about a plant's identity, he would always say “this looks like such-and-such, but I will find out for you”. Difficult specimens went to experts for confirmation (e.g. eucalypts to Blakely, orchids to Dr. Rogers, Rev. Rupp or Nicholls), and he attached much importance to Bentham's opinions as expressed in his own seven well-thumbed volumes of the *Flora Australiensis*. Proof of caution is evident in the fact that, although he must have handled many undescribed Victorian species in his lifetime, he never took the step of describing a single new plant. However, he is commemorated in the name of a leek-orchid, *Prasophyllum hartii* Rogers, that he discovered at Bairnsdale in November 1925.

Mr. Hart's herbarium of dried specimens (containing a full set, with field notes, of those collected in East Gippsland by W. Hunter), his district notebooks, correspondence and few books on botanical science were given (July 7) to the National Herbarium where they will be of permanent value. It remains but to place on record the sympathy that all members of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club feel for his surviving sisters-in-law (Miss M. Rickard and Mrs. Turner of Croydon) and his various nephews and nieces.